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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000211

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAILAND: AMBASSADOR ENGAGES OPPOSITION PARTY
CHAIR CHAVALIT ON THE YEAR AHEAD

REF: A. 09 BANGKOK 2644

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 149

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Ambassador called on opposition Puea Thai party Chair GEN Chavalit Yongchaiyuth January 26 to discuss the Thai political year ahead, the relationship between Thaksin, his Puea Thai party, and the red-shirt United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), and the agenda that Chavalit brought with him in his return to politics in late [1](#)2009. Chavalit only appeared animated during a discussion of his efforts to achieve reconciliation in Thailand's southern provinces. His answers on other domestic political issues and on efforts to improve Thai-Cambodia relations were abbreviated, and he allowed Puea Thai deputy party leader Kanawat Wasinsungworn do most of the talking about the party's strategy and assessment of the current political environment.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Chavalit's strangely subdued demeanor, deflated body language, and minimalist answers provided a striking contrast to a similar meeting in October, shortly after his appointment, when he exuded his trademark confidence and was full of plans (ref a). In addition, neither of Chavalit's long-time, ever-present aides attended the meeting, replaced instead by a deputy party leader and the party foreign policy adviser, former Ambassador Pithaya Pookaman. It is clear that "Team Thaksin" has sidelined, if not gagged, the elder politician who serves as the Chair of Puea Thai party and only four months ago was being touted by some as a likely next Prime Minister were Puea Thai to win the next election. The contrast with the energy, ideas, and action-packed agenda red-shirt leaders shared with Ambassador January 14 also could not have been clearer (ref B). For now, "Team Thaksin" appears much more reliant on street protests than parliamentary maneuvers to advance its agenda. End Summary and Comment.

A Subdued Chavalit: "I don't know what happened"

[1](#)3. (C) Puea Thai Chairman Chavalit warmly greeted Ambassador and PolCouns at Puea Thai party HQ January 26 with a bank of TV cameras rolling, but quickly changed moods once the conversation began. Chavalit acknowledged his previous plans

to travel to Thailand's neighbors in late 2009, starting with Cambodia, "had caused problems." Many friends in the region had initially said they wanted to see him: "but I don't know what happened," a tacit admission of the lack of subsequent travel after the sole Cambodian trip to advance fugitive former PM Thaksin's controversial Cambodia gambit.

14. (C) Ambassador asked Chavalit about the mix of actors and strategies in play in 2010 by Thaksin's supporters to force new elections, including Puea Thai and upcoming efforts in parliament for a no-confidence vote and constitutional amendments, and the UDD's promise to shut the streets of Bangkok in February with upwards of 500,000 protesters. Chavalit wanly replied that Puea Thai "hoped" for elections this year, that a no-confidence motion would come "sometime" after Valentine's Day, and that the situation with proposed amendments to the Constitution was "very confused," aimed at helping smaller parties. Puea Thai backed reinstatement of the 1997 constitution, he noted.

15. (C) After joking that his future plans were "secret," Chavalit offered a simple strategy for 2010: "keep doing things for the country, and rally; who knows, perhaps the government will fall tomorrow." Acknowledging that Thaksin, Puea Thai, and UDD were now closely coordinating efforts, he offered vague assurances looking forward: "don't worry; everything will be alright." He personally "hoped" that the red-shirts would not cause problems for Thailand, adding: "I don't think they will."

16. (C) Ambassador described the U.S. focus on bilateral economic issues affecting trade and investment, such as the Ma Tha Phut decision and customs reform, and asked Chavalit about the specific policy agenda for Puea Thai as the

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opposition party. Chavalit squirmed uncomfortably and turned to Deputy PT Party leader Kanawat to answer. Kanawat replied that the Democrats were focused on cash-give outs as a stimulus plan; when Thaksin's team had been in office, they implemented income-generating policies. When pressed on Puea Thai's current policy proposals, Kanawat replied vaguely that they would be revealed once an election campaign began.

Elections, but when?

17. (C) Kanawat did offer a crisper and more extensive read of current Puea Thai thinking than Chavalit. The red-shirts would focus on the theme of double standards in upholding the rule of law, he asserted. If the divides in society could not be solved in the parliamentary system, the Thai people should decide via new elections. The problems of the past several years stemmed from the fact that many people refused to accept the results of the 2007 election and allow the People's Power Party under then-PM Samak to govern, Kanawat claimed.

18. (C) Ambassador probed on what might trigger an election in 2010, since the coalition seemed solid enough, and a no-confidence motion likely to fail. Kanawat suggested the coalition was not as solid as it might appear, given coalition party unhappiness over Abhisit's management of the country and the coalition, and that the current effort to amend the constitution selectively could prove a "trick" that would play out differently than the Democrats anticipated. Puea Thai's relations with its former coalition partners--and post-coup defectors from Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party--remained good, asserted Kanawat. "It's never good to burn bridges," Chavalit added.

Seh Daeng, violence, and coup rumors

19. (C) Citing the troublesome advocate of violence MGEN Khattiya, widely known as "Seh Daeng," Ambassador asked Chavalit what relationship existed between Khattiya, Puea Thai, and UDD, given Khattiya's appearances at Thaksin

strategy sessions in Cambodia and Dubai since October. Both Chavalit and Kanawat offered evasive answers. Kanawat volunteered that Seh Daeng was providing protection to red-shirt rallies, not attending them (note: in fact, Seh Daeng refused to immediately answer a police summons January 23-24 related to the attack on Army Commander Anupong's office, choosing instead to appear as a speaker at a weekend red-shirt rally. End note). Chavalit replied: "Don't ask me." Ambassador suggested that it was troubling that such an open advocate of violence seemed beyond the control of authorities in the army, civilian government, and the courts. Chavalit finally added lamely: "he is a good man, and a good soldier. Behind the scenes, he is different."

¶10. (C) Kanawat asked Ambassador what the U.S. reaction would be to another coup (note: in recent days, PT MPs have resumed warning of the potential for a coup. End note). Ambassador replied that the U.S. had reacted negatively in 2006 and would do so again. He suggested that the Thai military should have re-learned the lesson that it was not able to administer the country capably. Despite the raucous Thai political scene in 2008-09, there was an active societal discourse about the political, economic, social, and regional divides the country faced and the need to overcome such divides. Another coup would stop that necessary process from going forward, Ambassador concluded.

The South

¶11. (C) Chavalit proved most engaging on the situation in Thailand's deep south, noting that he would be traveling there again the week of February 1. He had proposed a new concept of local administration, giving southerners more authority to govern themselves. Chavalit claimed to have received a good reaction to his proposal. In contrast, the government's approach would not succeed, he predicted, because they had misjudged the root causes of the situation and were proposing economic development as the solution. Lapsing back into generalities, he asserted: "Once we come to

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power, everything will stop." (note: this phase of the southern troubles began in January 2004, when Thaksin was PM; Thaksin's security policies, including when Chavalit served as DPM for security issues, are widely believed to have contributed to the worsening of the situation.)
JOHN